THE BELGIAN ROADSIDE CHAPELS OF WISCONSIN'S DOOR PENINSULA

Dr. Charles F. Calkins

Dr. William G. Laatsch

By William G. Laatsch and Charles F. Calkins

During the latter half of the 19th century, small Belgian chapels appeared on the rural landscape of the Door Peninsula, Wisconsin. The construction of these chapels by devout Catholics resulted from promises made for answers received to specific prayers of favor. Usually located immediately adjacent to section-line roads, they were used by family members, neighbors and by folks from afar. This article details the character and distribution of these chapels. The remaining chapels serve as an element of the Belgian material culture.

The title of a book *Old World Wisconsin: Around Europe in the Badger State* published over 40 years ago suggests the importance of ethnic islands in the settlement fabric of Wisconsin.[1] Evidence of ethnic islands and their associated cultural landscapes remains throughout much of the state. One such island settled by Walloon-speaking Belgians can be found in northeastern Wisconsin's Door Peninsula, which is composed of portions of Door, Kewaunee and Brown countries.[2]

Belgian immigrants, in particular, were attracted to this area between 1853 and 1857 from their homes primarily in the provinces of Brabant, Hanaut and Namur.[3] Cheap government land was available at $1.25 per acre. Over 3,800 foreign-born Belgians resided in the three-county area by 1860, representing 34% of the peninsula's population. Approximately 70% of the Belgians were clustered in an area that was to evolve into the rural Belgian ethnic island. The remainder were to be found largely in or very close to Green Bay, a city of 2,275 people.

A distinctive ethnic imprint emerged on the landscape as more Belgians settled in rural Door Peninsula. The most visible examples of the imprint were found in the forms of folk architecture. Many of these forms survive as relics and continue to serve as a cultural index for understanding the original settlements.[4] Prominent among the structures found on some farmsteads today are the outdoor bake ovens, some of which are still used on rare occasions.[5] Another Belgian folk structure is the small roadside votive chapel found on individual farm steads and built by the devout, Roman Catholic, Walloon-speaking Belgians (Figure 1).

Terry G. Jordan has suggested the need for geographical studies of the character, function, distribution and origin of these 24 chapels:

> . . . largely absent, so far as I can tell, from . . . American [folk architecture] researches has been ecclesiastical folk architecture, though European geographers have devoted some attention to this subject.[6]

Exceptions can be found in the work of Jordan on traditional rural chapels in Texas, James Griffith on the folk chapels of the Papago Indians in Arizona and Ingolf Vogeler on the chapels and shrines in central Minnesota.[7] These studies represent only a "scratching of the surface" of what needs to be done.

Characteristics

The Belgian roadside chapel is a small structure. At first glance, it could be mistaken for a tidy tool shed or a commodious privy! A typical chapel is of frame construction, rectangular and measures nine feet in length and seven and one-half feet in width (Figure 2). The gable roof stands nine feet at the peak and slopes to six and one-half feet at the eaves. Of 24 chapels, the largest is 12 feet by 10 feet and 10 feet high, whereas the smallest is six and one-half feet by five and one-half feet by eight feet. They sit a few inches off the ground and are supported simply by field stones at the corners or, more commonly, rest on a foundation of locally quarried dolomite.

Chapels generally have no windows, but if present, one small window may be found in the door. Neither the window nor the door contains religious symbols. A wooden or metal cross may be attached, however, immediately above the door or attached to the roof peak (Figure 1). Three stone chapels have crosses incorporated in the dolomite walls by the deliberate arrangement of the building stone or glacial erratics, which provide contrast in color, size and shape in such

WILLIAM G. LAATSCH *is an Associate Professor of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay.*

CHARLES F. CALKINS *is a Professor of Geography, Carroll College, Waukesha, Wisconsin.*

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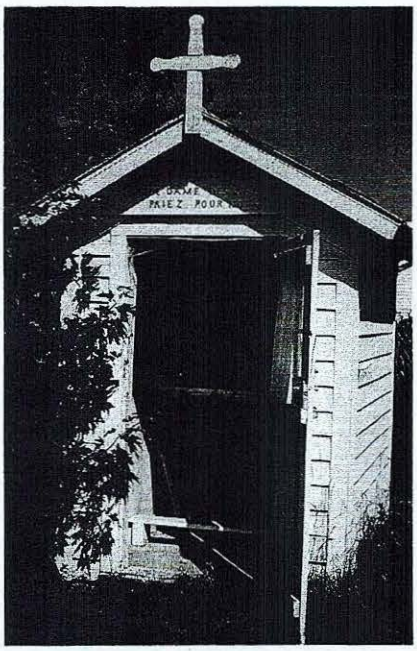


Figure 1. A Belgian chapel filled with religious artifacts located south of Rosiere, Wisconsin, 1984. (Source: authors)

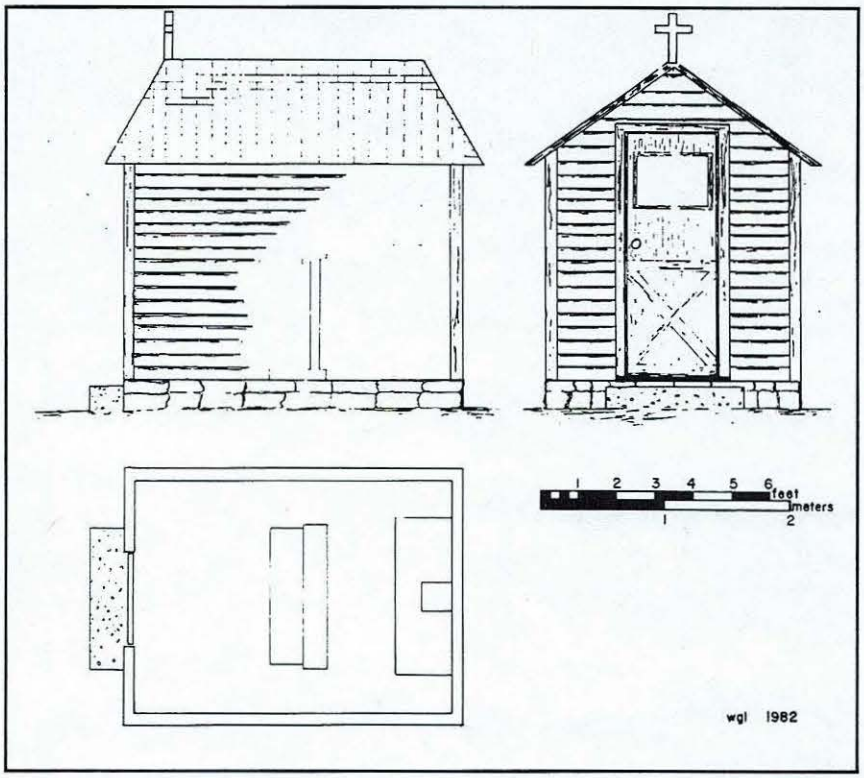


Figure 2. The Belgian chapel of northeastern Wisconsin.

an arrangement. An inscription above the door may attest further to the building's religious function and clearly sets it apart from a tool shed or privy. These inscriptions are always in French and may be lettered on a board or stamped out of metal. Examples include "Notre Dame Des Aflices Priez Pour Nous" and "Saint Ghislane Priez Pour Nous."

Whether frame or stone the Belgian chapels exhibit uniform interiors, which are finished with lath and plaster, plastered wall board or recently installed sheets of paneling. If plastered, the walls and ceilings are painted a pale color: white, blue, green or yellow. Floors are commonly made of varnished hard or soft woods and occasionally are covered with linoleum, indoor/outdoor carpeting or composition tiles.

The focus of this one-room structure is the altar, which is located directly opposite the door. Wooden, two or three tiered, usually without a cloth or lace cover, the altar provides a simple but adequate place for religious artifacts (Figure 3). The center of the higher tier is reserved for an element of special significance: a cross, a crucifix, a statue either of the Blessed Virgin or of an appropriate saint. The lower tier has a variety of other symbolic elements, including smaller statues, crosses, vases (with either artificial or fresh flowers), a container holding Holy Water and a can or small box for donations. Altars display as many as two dozen items, all arranged systematically to achieve symmetry in order to emphasize the dominant cross or statue. Furnishings are limited to a simply-built kneeling bench and, in the larger structures, a wooden chair or two.

Just as the altar is crowded but orderly, the walls are similarly adorned with pictures and a variety of certificates. The pictures, often relatively large, usually depict a special saint. In many cases it is clear that they have a European origin and have been purchased at a notable shrine. While interviewing an elderly Belgian gentleman at his chapel, he gazed at the pictures, turned and said "I got arts wert tousans," indicating the value he placed on his art collection.[9] At the same time, he revealed a relic ethnic speech pattern, with the troublesome plurals and "th" sounds. This speech pattern persists in the rural areas inhabited by Belgians and among Belgians residing in Green Bay. The certificates are, on the other hand, of local origin and acknowledge a baptism, first communion, marriage or death. Those dated before 1920 are inscribed in French. Chapel walls, then, are like pages of the family Bible where significant family events are recorded.

In most cases, a chapel resides on the farm of the family whose ancestors built the structure. If this is the case, the family continues to care for the building and its contents. Where the farm has changed hands, the new owner may assume responsibility for the chapel or, if no interest is expressed, a nearby relative or friend of the former owner may maintain the building. Whatever the case, the Belgian chapels are seen as important structures in the rural communities of the Door Peninsula.

Figure 3. The altar of the Bauduin chapel, Namur, Wisconsin, 1984. (Source: authors)

Function

There is no doubt that the general form of the chapels is secondary to their function. These are votive chapels that were built by devout Catholics and dedicated to and in honor of different saints or the Blessed Virgin in gratitude for favors sought or received through prayer. Although they may be used now for general purposes such as family devotions or as sites where people will gather on special occasions to say the Rosary, their primary function is a place of prayer for those who seek relief from the types of distress similar to those that caused the chapels to be built initially. Several examples will illustrate the point.

A chapel that is actively used today was originally built in the late 19th century by the Constantine Flemel family near Rosiere. The Flemels had several children die in infancy as a result of convulsions. They subsequently built a chapel in honor of St. Ghislane (actually St. Ghislain), the patron saint of small children, so that the family would have a place to pray for the intercession of the saint. Their devotion and sacrifice in building the chapel at this time are significant because there were two Catholic churches within a two-mile radius of the farmstead. Following its construction and early use, the Flemels had three very healthy children born to them, each ultimately reaching adulthood. This chapel's miraculous reputation has continued and is attested to in the following letter:

Nov. 30, 1962
DePere, Wisconsin

Dear Friends:
I suppose you's [sic] will be surprised to hear from me, but I have a girl who falls in convulsions and I know ma took me over to that chapel where you are now for it, and they say it helped. Mabel mentioned its still up. I'd like to take Coleen there. We'll go this Sunday, Dec. 2 or next if we can't make it then. It will probably be around noon or after twelve so were [sic] home before dark. If you plan on going away leave it open and I'll leave a note that we were there. If we don't make it this Sunday, write and let me know if the chapel is still there. I put a card in the envelope. The one next door has a married sister that might come along too.

Thanks—Irene[10]

In another case, Joseph Derenne, who was born in Bousoux, Belgium, and came to Duvall, Kewaunee County, in 1887 at age 14, was diagnosed in 1902 as having incurable cancer. At the urging of his brother, the family decided to build a chapel in honor of Our Lady of Lourdes. The finalization of the building plans reportedly had a positive effect on Derenne's deteriorating health. While the chapel was being constructed, Derenne's brother returned to Belgium. He brought back a large piece of a religious statuary, which was placed on the altar. Family members believed that the construction of the chapel was responsible for the miracle that further restored Derenne's health.[11]

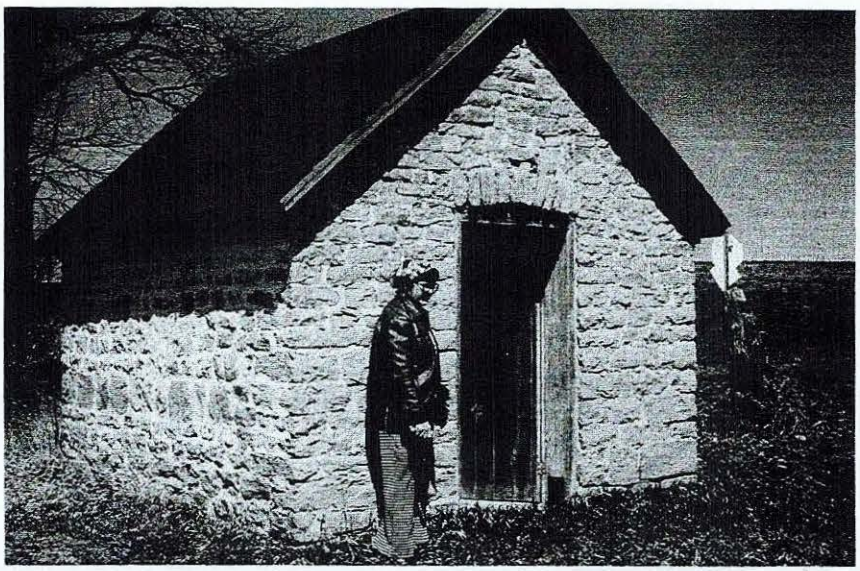


Figure 4. Mrs. Grace Lemense (now deceased) standing before the Destree chapel near Namur, Wisconsin, 1982. (Source: authors)

Joseph Destree, a Belgian stone mason who had a reputation in the Door Peninsula for building with the local Niagara dolomite, got hot lime in his eyes in about 1870 while practicing his trade. Fearing for his eyesight, he built a chapel in honor of St. Adele, believed locally to be the patron saint of eyes, who herself had been born blind but had her sight

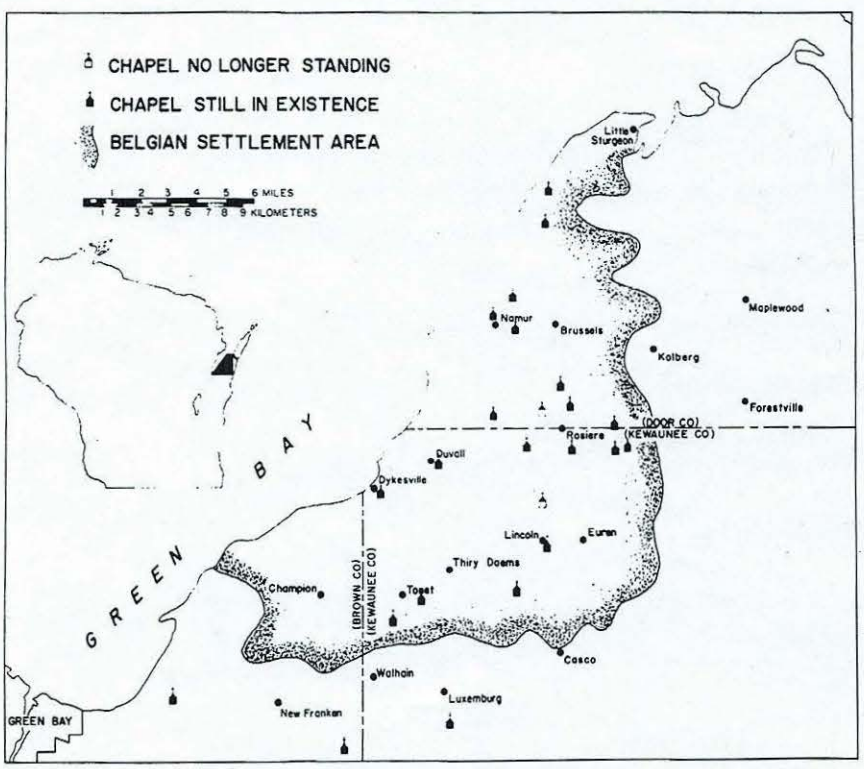


Figure 5. The roadside chapels of northeastern Wisconsin.

restored upon baptism. Destree maintained his eyesight throughout his life.[12] The chapel remains in its original location and is maintained by his descendants. (Figure 4) People with eye afflictions still come to the chapel with the hope of having their prayers answered.

Although the chapels are privately owned, they are available and commonly open to all, Belgians or non-Belgians, who care to use them. It appears that 10 chapels are used on a rather regular basis, especially during late spring, summer and fall. Deep snow accumulation during winter curtails access and the cold weather discourages even the most faithful. Information about their usage was obtained through interviews, registrations in guest books and observation. Three of the chapels had frequent visitations, six to eight per week, by family members, neighbors and people from outside the immediate rural Belgian community. Of these, one was used consistently by the elderly owners, and it was well known that they encouraged and welcomed use by others. Its guest register for the summer months of 1981-1986 showed that visitors had come from Algoma, Green Bay, Luxemburg, Milwaukee and Sheboygan, Wisconsin as well as from St. Paul, Minnesota, and Hollywood, Florida.[13] Presumably, many locals also used the chapel, but they did not bother to sign the register. Votive candles were provided for those visitors who had neglected to bring their own.[14] Another of these three chapels was used frequently, but primarily by family members. The young farmer/owner indicated that he and his wife used the chapel for prayers "at least a couple of times a week" and that his parents, who formerly lived on the property, came from their home to maintain the chapel and pray in it "more often than we do, almost every day."[15]

The other seven chapels were visited an estimated six to ten times a month. This pattern of visits is characteristic of chapels owned by someone other than descendants of family members originally responsible for their construction. Although new owners, many of whom are non-Belgian, will maintain the chapels, they do not use them with the same frequency as in the cases of those chapels that are identified with particular Belgian families.

The remaining 14 chapels are used rarely, if at all. Five of these no longer function as chapels. The religious artifacts have been removed from them, and they stand idle. No new functions have been assigned to the vacant buildings, however. The farmsteads on which these chapels are located are owned by non-Belgian, non-Catholic folks, who have moved into and have diluted somewhat the Belgian stronghold. They are rural non-farm people who commute to nearby Green Bay for their livelihoods. Their allegiances are not to the Belgian community and its customs.

Location Within the Farmstead

Clearly, the chapel is part of the ensemble of buildings constituting the Belgian farmstead; yet, its distinctive function and, in turn, unique location on the farmstead tend to set it apart because of its orientation to a section line road. At the time of their original construction, the chapels were placed adjacent to roads so that the faithful could have free and immediate access without having to enter the farmstead proper via a lane or driveway. To this day, chapel owners do not exercise the same kind of proprietary rights over the chapel as they do over the remainder of the farm in general. They view the chapel as community property, and freedom of access is encouraged. The same certainly does not apply to the rest of the farm property, which is considered private—trespassing is overtly discouraged. The distinctiveness of the chapel's location is further enhanced by its being separated from the house, barns and driveways by a low hedge, flower garden or fence. Thus, the chapel becomes more of a sanctuary and less a "farm" structure. Visitors park their cars along the road's shoulder and walk a few short steps to enter a chapel.

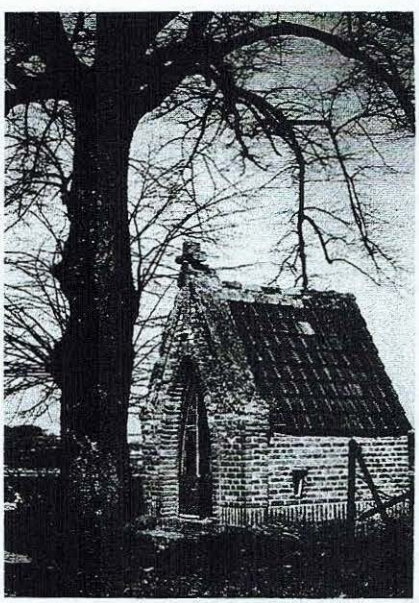


Figure 6. A tile tooled brick chapel, 30 kilometers south of the city of Namur, Belgium, 1983. (Source: authors)

Whereas proximity to a road is an advantage for both user and owner, it is however a disadvantage for the longevity of some chapels. Road widening, errant vehicles and over zealous snowplow drivers have on occasion reduced a chapel to a pile of kindling wood. At least four owners have anticipated either possibility and have moved their chapels a greater distance from the right-of-way.

Distribution

Field work over the last decade has identified 24 chapels on the Door Peninsula (Figure 5). Of these, 21 are located in the Belgian settlement area. This area, defined by farm ownership where approximately 80% of the farms are owned by Belgians, contains numerous elements of Belgian material and non-material culture. Most of the chapels are found in the vicinity of Rosiere, a hamlet on the Door-Kewaunee County line, outside of the settlement area near Green Bay. Two of them were moved from the area's community of Brussels to their present locations and the remaining chapel was built and maintained by a Belgian family.

Origin

Belgium's Walloon region was the source area for the Door Peninsula chapels. While similar in size and function there are notable differences (Figure 6). The Walloons used brick and stone almost exclusively for building materials. Instead of the typical rectangular door, the Belgian chapels feature an arched, often Gothic, entrance with the interior protected only by a metal grill. Open to the weather the interiors are rather plain with only a few plants flanking a statue or a crucifix. The locations of Walloon chapels in Belgium are less predictable than the cases in Wisconsin. They are found in urban centers, along rural roads, within forests or are incorporated into farmyard walls.

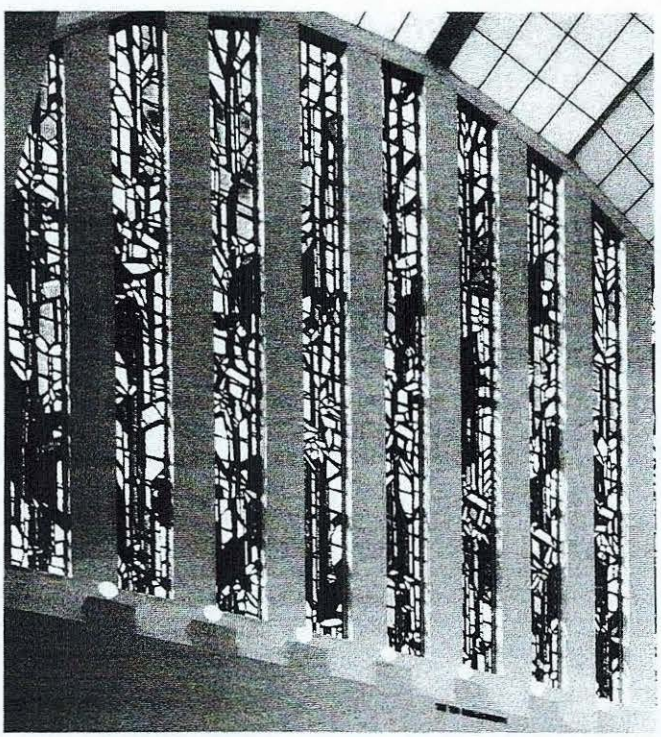
Conclusions

The nature, function, distribution and origin of the Belgian roadside chapels of the Door Peninsula have been analyzed. Wisconsin's rural Belgians have demonstrated remarkable persistence in their attachment to the Door Peninsula and in

the maintenance of their culture. There are signs that the solidarity of the Belgian settlement area is being eroded somewhat by the movement of non-farm, non-Belgians into the area. Should this continue at an accelerated rate, the elements of Belgian culture—including the roadside chapels—may disappear as the Belgian population is diluted.

FOOTNOTES

1. Fred L. Holmes, *Old World Wisconsin: Around Europe in the Badger State* (Eau Claire: E.M. Hale, 1944).
2. Charles F. Calkins and William G. Laatsch, "The Belgian Outdoor Ovens of Northeastern Wisconsin," *Pioneer America Society Transactions*, 2 (1979), p. 8.
3. Holmes, p. 164. For a recent demographic analysis of this migration, see Mary Ann Defnet, et. al., *From Grez-Doiceau to Wisconsin: Contribution á l'étude de l'émigration wallonne vers les Etats-Unis d' Amerique au XIX ème siècle* (Bruxells: DeBoeck Universite, 1986).
4. Cotton Mather and Matti Kaups, "The Finnish Sauna: A Cultural Index to Settlement," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 53 (December, 1963), pp. 494-504.
5. Calkins and Laatsch, pp. 1-12.
6. Terry G. Jordan, "The Traditional Southern Rural Chapel in Texas," *Ecumene*, 8 (1976), p. 6. Also see, Peirce F. Lewis, "Learning From Looking: Geographic and Other Writing about the American Landscape," in *Material Culture: A Research Guide*, ed. by Thomas J. Schlereth (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1985), p. 44.
7. Jordan, pp. 6-17; James S. Griffith, "The Folk-Catholic Chapels of the Papagueria," *Pioneer America*, 7 (July, 1975), pp. 21-36.
8. Eric L. Swanick, *Religious Architecture of Canada* (Monticello, Ill.: Vance Bibliographies, 1980).
9. Interview with Jule Vandertie, Rosiere, Wisconsin, August 17, 1978. With his heavily accented English, Mr. Vandertie was attempting to convey the belief that his chapel art works were worth thousands of dollars. The obvious discrepancy between the perceived and real values is an indicator of the very high sentimental value placed on the chapel and its contents by most owners.
10. Mrs. Melvin (Irene) Campbell to Mr. and Mrs. Jule Vandertie, 30 November 1962. Letter in the possession of Mrs. Jule Vandertie.
11. "Catholic Roadside Chapel Donated to Park," *Heritage Hill Intelligencer*, n.v. (Summer, 1984), p. 7.
12. John Kahlert, "Devout Belgian Settlers Built Shrines Out of Faith, Gratitude," *Door County Advocate* (Sturgeon Bay), September 7, 1978, p. 1, part 2.
13. An informal guest register found in the chapel owned by Mr. and Mrs. Jule Vandertie, N.W. 1/4, S.32, T.26N., R.24E., on August 20, 1981.
14. Interview with Mr. Jule Vandertie, July 6, 1978.
15. Interview with Mr. Randy Vincent, August 21, 1981.



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